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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EPET](#) [ENRG](#) [MARR](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: SENATOR LUGAR'S JANUARY 10 MEETING WITH MIKHEIL  
SAAKASHVILI AND ACTING PRESIDENT BURJANADZE

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a January 10 refueling stop in Tbilisi, Senator Richard Lugar met with Mikheil Saakashvili and Acting President Nino Burjanadze. Although Saakashvili's re-election as President of Georgia has not yet been confirmed, acting President Nino Burjanadze clearly deferred to his opinions. Saakashvili claimed the January 5 presidential election was "free and fair", and competitive. He readily accepted the emergence of a stronger opposition to his National Movement party, but was critical of his opponents in the election and many of the the Tbilisi elite who supported the opposition strongly. Saakashvili expressed support for judicial reform and cooperation with the United States on nuclear and biological threat reduction. He asked Lugar and the USG to help deter Russian "adventurism" in the aftermath of a declaration of independence in Kosovo, and to actively support NATO Membership Action Plans for both Ukraine and Georgia. He also urged Lugar to help find ways to mediate disputes between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan that stand in the way of a linking of gas transport infrastructure in the Caspian that would provide a route for Turkmen gas to reach Georgia and Europe. End Summary.

SAAKASHVILI SEES FREE, FAIR ELECTIONS  
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¶2. (C) Saakashvili was clearly relaxed and enjoying his still unofficial, narrow victory in the first round of the recent special presidential election. Despite the presence of acting President Burjanadze, Saakashvili dominated the table and the conversation. Both Saakashvili and Senator Lugar expressed appreciation for the calming and conciliating role Burjanadze played during the recent political turmoil.

¶3. (C) Saakashvili was proud that the elections were, in his words, free and fair, but also competitive in a way not seen in other Caucasus and Central Asian countries. Each precinct was hard fought, he said. Over the past 45 days he had met more than 300,000 people in a tough campaign schedule. The National Movement had good ads on television as well, he added. Saakashvili also gave some credit for his showing to an American public relations firm the National Movement had hired to assist with election campaigning and polling. The firm's polls, he said, were more accurate than anyone else's and had correctly predicted his reported 52 percent share of the vote. In essence, he said, because of the weakness of his opponents he was essentially running against himself. The fact that he only received 52 percent of the vote despite a 70 percent approval rating was humbling, he said. However, he had had to take the risk of submitting to an election in order to gain a mandate for continued reform.

¶4. (C) The January 5 election was the first where international election monitors were genuinely enthusiastic

about the election process, Saakashvili claimed. Saakashvili benefited from strong support in minority Azerbaijani and Armenian regions of the country. He said that for the first time in the Azeri regions, because of voter education efforts, a large number of women voted in the election, which he said accounts for the high turnouts in those regions. By contrast, he said, it was Tbilisi's former elite that had lost its privileges under his government that voted against him. They were also dismayed by the violent breakup of the November 7 demonstration that happened before their eyes. Many such people, Saakashvili said, had been living from corruption and smuggling but lost those opportunities because of his government's crackdown on economic crime. Senator Lugar expressed concern about the closure of television stations during the November state of emergency. Saakashvili said that one of the station's owners (Badri Patarkatsishvili) was trying to kill him and to lead a coup against the government -- which could not be allowed. However, he said, every voter had an opportunity to see the opposition on television, and this is in part what won the opposition the votes they did receive in the regions. The problem in Georgia is not the freedom of the press, but its lack of professionalism, he contended. The most popular political talk show host in Georgia is more like Jerry Springer than Oprah, he joked.

15. (C) Saakashvili recognized the need for a responsible opposition, but he did not have kind words for his opponents in the recent election. If they had won, he said, then "Georgia would go to hell". The opposition leaders, he said, are people who have not changed since "civil war times" -- 1992-93, in the Georgian context. It is the government's failure that no good alternative has been created. Saakashvili said that the plebiscite supported holding parliamentary elections in the Spring. He said it was too

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early to tell what the outcome of the elections will be, but predicted that they will be the most competitive elections ever held in Georgia. He estimated that turnout should be lower than the January 5 presidential election. Saakashvili expects that the new parliament will have a very different makeup than the current one.

16. (C) Asked about Russian interference in the elections, if any, Saakashvili said that there was a tacit agreement with Moscow that if Saakashvili would not make Russia an issue in the campaign, then the Russians would "be good to him" afterward. They broke that promise and sharply criticized the conduct of the elections. For their part, Saakashvili said, some European election observers also hold Georgia to an unfairly high standard. They criticized him for effusive campaign publicity over opening roads in the regions, he said, but don't recognize that their own politicians take credit for government benefits in the runup to their own elections in more or less the same way.

JUDICIAL REFORM THE NEXT PRIORITY  
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17. (C) One of Saakashvili's post-election priorities is judicial reform, he said. Even now, he said, judges salaries are being raised (more than our own!, Burjanadze interjected). Lots of young professionals are entering the judicial ranks, he said, and trial by jury will be implemented this year. Still, he said, creating a well-run, independent judiciary is not easy, as illustrated by the situation in Ukraine.

THREAT REDUCTION COOPERATION TO CONTINUE  
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18. (C) Lugar told Saakashvili that he is pleased with Georgia's cooperation on nuclear and biological threat reduction, an issue in which Lugar is very interested. Saakashvili pledged to continue this cooperation.

CONCERN ABOUT RUSSIAN ADVENTURISM, POST-KOSOVO

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¶9. (C) Saakashvili urged Lugar to help the USG and the Europeans deter Russian "adventurism" in the period after a unilateral declaration of independence in Kosovo. He said that Georgia is not opposed to Kosovo's independence, but would prefer that the act take place as soon as possible, because "delays cause problems". Georgia is asking the European Union to announce a permanent non-recognition policy for the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he said.

MAP FOR UKRAINE HELPS MAP FOR GEORGIA, AND BOTH NEED SUPPORT

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¶10. (C) Saakashvili said that obtaining an offer of a Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine is crucial, and urged Lugar to do all he can to support it. Work is needed with the French and the Germans, he said, and in that, the support of the U.S. Secretary of State is essential. He added that Ukraine should not be ignored, since new polls show a fragile but positive level of support for NATO membership there. The leadership's role in Ukraine is key now, he said. He noted that the Europeans are interested in pulling Ukraine into NATO. This fact is good for Georgia's chances, he believes, because Georgia is demonstrably ahead of Ukraine in its preparations for NATO membership.

GAS FROM TURKMENISTAN FEASIBLE IF DISPUTES CAN BE RESOLVED

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¶11. (C) When Lugar noted he was going to Turkmenistan, Saakashvili told him that Turkmen President Berdymuhammedov is expected to come to Saakashvili's inauguration, planned for January 20. Berdymuhammedov holds the key to increasing supplies of gas to Europe via Georgia, Saakashvili said. That gas has two ways to reach Europe from Georgia, Saakashvili said, via Turkey or via an as yet un-built pipeline under the Black Sea to Ukraine, which Saakashvili believes is a good idea. Turkmenistan is ready to sell gas to willing buyers at its border, he added. Unfortunately, disputes continue with Azerbaijan over ownership of some offshore gas fields. If those disputes can be resolved, it will be a cheap and simple matter to connect existing Turkmen offshore gas wells to pipes serving other Azeri wells in the Caspian Sea, and move some amounts of gas out that way. What is needed, Saakashvili said, is a good mediator between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The Turkmen are disappointed that the Europeans can't get organized and make their

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position on the issue understood. They only send representatives who give the Turkmen general lectures but make no specific offers or proposals. Meanwhile, Saakashvili said, Russian President Putin is pushing, blackmailing and bribing to get deals in Central Asia. Saakashvili observed that Berdymuhammedov used Western interest in investment as a tool to obtain a better price for Turkmenistan's gas from Russia, and is still open to Western connections.

¶12. (U) Senator Lugar did not have an opportunity to clear this telegram.

TEFFT